

Tawhid in Ismaili Esoteric Philosophy

Bismillah hir Rahman nir Rahim

(In the Name of Allah, the Most Compassionate, the Most Merciful)

Among all the doctrines that form the theological framework of Islam, none is more central and unifying than the concept of Tawhid or the oneness of God. Every Muslim, regardless of sect, recognizes Tawhid as the foundation of their faith. Although there are diverse interpretations and doctrinal elaborations, leading to a wide range of theological understandings, this inquiry will primarily focus on the interpretation of Tawhid within the Nazari Ismaili tradition.

For the sake of contrast and clarity, we will also briefly examine other perspectives found within the broader Islamic intellectual tradition.

We must clearly establish the metaphysical foundation upon which Ismaili Tawhid is built. God is One, not merely in numerical terms, but in absolute and ontological singularity. He has no beginning or end. He is transcendent and fundamentally different from His creation. He is not a "thing" among other things, nor is He made up of parts. Human beings, being finite and composed of various parts, are inherently incapable of fully describing the divine essence. This understanding forms the basis of the Ismaili approach to Tawhid.

Having outlined the fundamental theological views of Ismailis, we can now explore the implications of this principle more deeply. To do so, we need to address a theological issue: the *"attributes"* of God, which are frequently mentioned in the Qur'ān and discussed in various doctrinal contexts.

For classification, we may reduce the broad Islamic discourse on this subject to four general groups:

1. Literalist Interpretation (Zāhirī): The first group insists upon a literal reading of the Qur'ānic verses. For them, the attributes ascribed to God such as hearing, seeing, knowing are accepted

without any interpretation. However, when confronted with anthropomorphic(human characteristics) implications that seem unfitting or imperfect, they say, "only God knows its interpretation."(-)

2. The second group, while accepting the Qur'ānic attributes, holds that these attributes do not resemble those of creation. They assert that God has knowledge, power, and will, but unlike any similar human faculties.(-)
3. The third position, influenced by the theological school of the Mu'tazila, adopts a rationalistic approach. They affirm the unity of God by denying that His attributes exist independently of His essence. For them, any assertion of eternal attributes beside the essence of God undermines His unity.(-)
4. The fourth, and the one we shall support here, is the Nizārī Ismaili thought. It affirms the transcendence of God to such a degree that not only are anthropomorphic traits excluded, but even seemingly praiseworthy attributes such as knowledge and power cannot be ascribed to Him. The Ismaili view, consistent with a Neoplatonic-influenced cosmology and esoteric interpretation, holds that God is utterly beyond all descriptions, attributes, and conceptualizations.(-)

We shall now proceed to examine the rationale behind the Ismaili view of divine attributes, particularly in contrast to the other positions.

Let us return to the first group mentioned. They rely heavily upon the literal text of the Qur'ān and are content with superficial acceptance without interpretation. Consider the verse:

"There is nothing like unto Him, He is hearing and seeing."(-)

While the first part of the verse *"There is nothing like unto Him"* is universally accepted as a reaffirmation of divine transcendence, the

Ismaili critique begins with the second part: "He is hearing and seeing." How can the Qur'ān affirm that nothing is like Him while also attributing to Him faculties that, in every instance known to us, belong to created beings?

Nasir Khusraw, the renowned 11th-century Ismaili da'i and philosopher, offers a critique of this group's view on this verse, which to him serves as a contradiction:

"A consensus holds that God may not be described by the attributes of creatures and that He retains none of the features of His creation. If a man may be knowing, seeing, and hearing, and if God too may be knowing, seeing, and hearing, then, in conformity...that man must necessarily be like God."¹

Here, the contradiction lies not in the scripture itself, but in its interpretation. The Ismaili tradition, following Tawil (esoteric interpretation), recognizes that attributing such faculties to God in any literal sense would undermine His singularity. Furthermore, the claim that God possesses 99 names each of which is said to reflect a divine attribute presents an additional philosophical problem.

*The 99 names have different meanings, and that anyone who has 99 names cannot be the same person because each of the 99 names have its own essence.*²

A being with numerous essences or defining qualities cannot, by definition, be simple or singular in nature. Furthermore, many traditionalists have asserted that God possesses limbs or bodily

¹ *Jami al-hikmatayn, Nasir i-Khusraw, trans, Eric Omsby, 2012, 44*

² See *Jami al-hikmatayn, 51*

features. This statement is philosophically untenable from the Ismaili standpoint.

The concept of the body itself is defined by its divisibility. Nasir Khusraw provides a clear philosophical definition:

“...a body is defined as something of substance which is both divisible and extended; it has three dimensions: length, breadth, and depth. A body is not defined (solely] by colour, weight, or moistness. Just so, fire, though it is hot and dry, bright and mobile, is a body.”³

Thus, even something immaterial in appearance, such as fire or water, still qualifies as a body if it occupies space. By this logic, to claim that God has a body even one did not compose of flesh is to ascribe multiplicity to Him. This is different with the doctrine of absolute unity and transcendence.(-)

Supporters of the Ash‘arite or Mu‘tazilite views might respond by asserting that God’s knowledge and power are unlike ours. His knowledge encompasses all things, past and future, whereas ours is limited. Yet Nasir Khusraw addresses this rationalization directly:

“We reply to such a theologian as follows: The knowledgeable, the powerful, and the living do not all stand at the same level (martabat). Knowledge, power, and life may be big and small, and yet, all share in knowledge, power, and life, by definition. For example... So, too, a scholar who has great knowledge is knowing, but even he who has only a little knowledge is also ⁴knowing. It is as God says, 'And above every man of knowledge is one who knows?' And so God does not exclude a man of lesser knowledge from the definition of knowledge because of the greater knowledge of a more learned man.”(-)

³ *Jami al-hikmatayn*, 52

⁴ *Jami al-hikmatayn*, pg 53

In other words, even the most exalted qualities, when ascribed to both man and God, fall into the same category. This idea once again fails to incorporate the concept of an absolute distinction between Creator and creation.

To those who question whether this interpretation has roots in the earliest doctrines of Islamic tradition, we cite a profoundly philosophical sermon by Imam Ali b. Abi Talib, recognized as the first Imam in Shi'i Islam and the fourth Caliph by Sunnis:

“...the perfection of testifying Him is to believe in His One-ness, the perfection of believing in His One-ness is to regard Him Pure, and the perfection of His purity is to deny Him attributes, because every attribute is a proof that it is different from that to which it is attributed and everything to which something is attributed is different from the attribute. Thus, whoever attaches attributes to Allah recognizes His like, and who recognizes His like regards Him two; and who regards Him two recognizes parts for Him; and who recognizes parts for Him mistook Him; and who mistook Him pointed at Him; and who pointed at Him admitted limitations for Him; and who admitted limitations for Him numbered him.”⁵

The Imam's reasoning here leaves no doubt: attribution implies duality, duality implies composition, and composition implies physical traits. All these are impossible with regard to God.

In conclusion, the Ismaili approach to Tawhid emphasizes that the attribution of qualities to God, even ones that appear perfect, are projections of the human mind. As humans, we define perfection by negating imperfection. Thus, we declare God “All-Knowing” not because we understand divine knowledge, but because ignorance is

⁵ Imam Ali ibn Abu Talib, *Nahjul Balagha, Sermons, Letters and Sayings of Imam Ali ibn Abu Talib*, trans. Sayed Ali Reza (Tahrike Tarsile Qur'an, Inc, 1996), 91

undesirable. Pir Shihabu'd-din an important figure in the modern Ismaili era states

“They attribute to God a perfection opposite to that.”⁶

The Qur'ān itself affirms this understanding in Surah al-Ikhlās:

*“In the name of Allah, Most Gracious, Most Merciful. He is Allah the One; Allah, the Eternal, Absolute; He begetteth not, nor is He begotten; And there is none like unto Him.”*⁷

Even in those Qur'anic verses that seem to suggest the existence of divine limbs or anthropomorphic traits, the Ismaili tradition, through Tawil, affirms that these are metaphorical expressions, not literal descriptions. God is not physical in any sense He does not possess hands, eyes, or a throne in any physical manner.

In summary, while every sect of Islam agrees that God is beyond all, it is only through negating all comparison and all attributes that this transcendence can be fully preserved. Any assertion otherwise risks drawing the Creator into the realm of the created and thereby violates the very essence of Tawhid.

Some may inquire: If the attributes mentioned in the Qur'ān and the Hadith do not literally describe the essence of God, then what do they signify?

In addressing this question, one must turn to the metaphysical understanding found in both Ismaili thought and other streams of esoteric Islamic philosophy. The attributes, far from being objective descriptors of the Divine Essence, are reflections manifested in the Vicegerent (Khalifa) the human being as the mirror of divine realities.

The celebrated Sufi metaphysician Ibn Arabi, in his *Fusus al-Ḥikam* (*The Bezels of Wisdom*), offers a profound explanation of this point.

⁶ Shah al-Husayni, Shihabu'd-Din. True Meaning of Religion (Risala dar Haqiqat-i Din). Translated by W. Ivanow, 3rd ed., Ismaili Society Series B, no. 9, The Ismaili Society, 1956.

⁷ Q 112:1

He reports that the contents of this work were conveyed to him by the Prophet Muhammad in a visionary dream, thereby lending it a spiritual authority among many Sufi circles. In discussing the creation of Adam as God's vicegerent, he states:

"All the Names constituting the Divine Image are manifest in the human formation so that this information enjoys a degree by which it encompasses and integrates all existence."⁸

In this conception, it is not God Himself who possesses the attributes in a literal sense; rather, these names and qualities are reflected in Adam, the prototype of humanity. The mirror analogy wherein the human being becomes the locus in which the divine names appear is a recurrent theme across multiple traditions and lies at the heart of esoteric theologies. The divine names thus pertain to the *manifest world*, not to the unknowable Essence (dhat) of God.

It is crucial to emphasize that this understanding is not exclusive to Ismailism. Rather, it is part of a wider Neoplatonic inheritance, transmitted and transformed across various schools of thought. From Plotinus in Ancient Greece to the Islamic philosophers Ibn Sīnā (Avicenna) and Ibn 'Arabī, and even to early Christian mystics such as Origen of Alexandria and Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, the concept of a transcendent One whose essence is beyond all names and attributes, yet who manifests through intermediaries, constitutes a shared metaphysical framework.

Within Ismailism, this concept is further refined: the Imam, as the locus of divine guidance, reflects the spiritual reality of these attributes, making them accessible to human understanding not as statements about God's essence, but as symbols pointing toward the divine mystery through the veil of creation.

In conclusion, let it be clearly stated that we do not suggest that the divine names and attributes mentioned in the Qur'ān or invoked in *dhikr* are problematic within devotional contexts. Muslims across all

⁸ Ibn Arabi, *Fusus al-Hikam*(The Bezels of Wisdom), trans, R.W.J. Austin, 52

traditions employ these names in their prayers and spiritual practices, and rightly so. However, when one enters the realm of philosophical and theological inquiry, where precision of language and metaphysical logic are important, it becomes necessary to distinguish between God's essence, which is beyond all comprehension and description, and the manifest attributes, which reflect aspects of creation, not the Creator.

As the Ismaili tradition has long maintained and as said in the sayings of Imam Ali, Naṣir-i Khusraw, other Ismaili dais and even non-Ismaili sages such as Ibn 'Arabī, God is beyond all attributes, beyond all predicates, and beyond all comparison. Any understanding of God must begin with the negation of all limitations, for He is One in a manner that admits of no second, and thus no likeness, no category, no attribute.